

Tips for a Safer Thanksgiving Dinner

Thanksgiving stirs memories of baking pies, Grandpa's stuffing, and overflowing tables of food. But, did you know that improperly handled Thanksgiving food causes more than a half million cases of food borne illness every year? The Food and Drug Administration estimates that 2% to 3% of all food poisoning cases lead to serious illness such as arthritis, kidney failure, meningitis, and Guillain-Barre syndrome. Pregnant women, young babies, older adults, and those with weakened immune systems are at greatest risk.

The majority of food borne illness can be prevented with simple precautions. Here are a dozen tips to help you stay healthy over the holiday.

1. Wash your hands frequently, especially after handling raw poultry. To keep it simple, wash your hands every time you start to prepare a different food, if you leave the kitchen, or after you go to the bathroom. Nearly half of all food borne illness can be prevented with this one simple precaution.
2. Don't thaw food on the kitchen counter. Thaw foods slowly in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or in the microwave. Defrosting raw poultry should be placed on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so that it does not drip on other foods.
3. Avoid cross-contamination. Wash cutting boards and knives after cutting raw poultry and before using them to cut other foods. Wash cutting boards with hot water, soap, and an abrasive scrubber to remove all food particles. Sanitize them by putting them in the dishwasher. Disposable cutting boards are a good holiday option. And, never place cooked food in a dish or platter that previously held raw food – even vegetables; remember they grew in the dirt.
4. Don't stuff the refrigerator. Cold air needs to circulate to keep the temperature constant and low enough to keep foods safe. Use a picnic cooler for beverages to free up space. And, even if it's snowing, the garage shouldn't be used to keep foods cold.
5. Don't eat the cookie dough or let children lick the rubber scraper. Dough made with raw eggs may contain salmonella, a leading cause of food poisoning. There is no risk from baked cookies or cakes because the salmonella is easily destroyed by heat.
6. If you drop it dump it. No matter what your mother said, food that lands on the floor shouldn't be eaten.
7. Travel with care when bringing food. If your trip will be longer than a half hour -- and with holiday traffic you never know -- use a cooler or insulated bag to keep cold foods cold or hot foods hot. Microwave hot packs make great heat boosters when traveling with hot foods.
8. Keep hot foods hot. It's better to replenish than let foods sit out too long. Whether the food is hot or cold, 2 hours is the limit at room temperature.
9. Boil the gravy. If gravy is made from pan drippings bring it to a rolling boil before serving. If you use the gravy again as a leftover be sure to heat to a rolling boil before serving it a second time.
10. Debone leftover turkey. The carcass harbors the most bacteria, so remove leftovers from the bones and store the meat in a covered container in the refrigerator.
11. Refrigerate leftovers when dinner is done. No matter how tempting it is to watch the game or linger over another cup of coffee, room temperature foods are an incubator for bacteria. Put leftovers in shallow pans so they cool quickly. Large pots cool too slowly, giving bacteria a chance to thrive.
12. Leftovers should be eaten or discarded in 3 to 4 days. You can freeze cooked turkey, gravy and many mixed dishes. Cranberry sauce will last for a week in the refrigerator. Bacteria can be present in leftovers held too long even when they smell and look perfectly fine.

Eat safely and happy Thanksgiving.

